

Voter Participation in Presidential Primaries and Caucuses*

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The possibility that voter participation might be different in 2008 surfaced in the nation's first nominating contest, the Iowa caucuses. The old participation record was 220,000 voters, set in 2000. Turnout in 2008 was far higher and occurred on a bitterly cold January night. More than 350,000 Iowans braved the winter weather to express their preference for the next president of the United States. In yet another sign of things to come, the youth vote—ballots cast by those under 30 years of age—was three times greater than it had been in 2004.¹

In percentage terms, Iowa's turnout was hardly earthshaking—only one in six of the eligible adults participated. The Democratic winner, Barack Obama, received the votes of just 4 percent of Iowa's eligible voters. Mike Huckabee, the Republican victor, attracted the support of a mere 2 percent of Iowa adults.

Nevertheless, the 16.3 percent turnout level was not only an all-time Iowa record, it was easily the highest percentage ever recorded for a presidential caucus, and about eight times the average for such contests. In fact, the turnout in the Iowa caucuses, which require voters to meet and discuss the candidates before casting their voters, was higher

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than the turnout in *most* of the presidential primaries held in 2000—the last time both parties had contested nominating races.

More than a score of primary and caucus turnout records were set in 2008. Overall, about 57 million Americans voted in the 2008 nominating elections, which easily eclipsed the 31 million who voted in 2000, the last time both major parties had contested races.

The 2008 nominating contests had unprecedented features, including the candidacies of the first viable woman presidential candidate and the first viable African American presidential candidate. The 2008 contests were also atypical of recent contests in that the outcome was not determined on Super Tuesday, which meant that residents of states with primaries and caucuses yet to come had reason to go to the polls. Accordingly, any assessment of voter participation in presidential nominating elections requires a look not only at the 2008 contests but at previous ones as well.

Toward a Voter-Centered Nominating Process: 1972-1984

Through the 1968 campaign, presidential nominations were securely in the hands of party leaders. Although primary elections were held in about a third of the states, most of the national conventions delegates were selected through party caucuses controlled by party leaders. In 1952, for example, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee defeated President Harry Truman in New Hampshire's opening primary. Kefauver then went on to win all

but one of the other twelve primaries he entered and was the favorite of rank-and-file Democrats in the final Gallup poll before the party's national convention. Yet Democratic leaders rejected the border-state senator and chose instead Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, a traditional New Dealer, who was not even a declared presidential candidate. When asked about the significance of the primaries, Stevenson replied: "All [they do] is destroy some candidates."²

The party-centered nominating system was shattered by the bitter 1968 presidential election. The country was mired in the war in Vietnam, and senators Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy challenged Lyndon Johnson's bid for a second term by entering the presidential primaries as anti-war candidates. Their strong showing, which was accompanied by one of the highest voter turnout levels in primary election history,³ persuaded Johnson to drop from the race. However, Kennedy was assassinated the night of the last primary and McCarthy had angered party leaders with his blunt attacks on President Johnson. On the first ballot, the convention delegates nominated Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who had not entered a single primary. Insurgent Democrats were outraged, and after Humphrey narrowly lost the general election, they engineered a change in the nominating system.

Through its McGovern-Fraser Commission, the Democratic Party adopted rules designed to place voters in charge of the nominating process. State parties were directed to choose their convention delegates through either a primary election or a caucus open to all registered party voters. In its final report, the Commission pointedly stated the goal:

“We view popular participation as the lifeblood of the National Convention. . . . We believe that popular participation is more than a proud heritage of our party, more even than a first principle. We believe that popular control of the Democratic Party is necessary for its survival. . . .”⁴

The Commission expected the sixteen states with primaries to retain them and assumed that the other states would comply with the new rules by opening their caucuses to all party registrants.⁵ However, Democratic Party leaders in some caucus states were reluctant to open up the caucuses to all comers in fear that insurgents might use the meetings to capture control of the party organization. Six caucus states switched to primary elections in 1972 and seven more switched in 1976, with a dozen more to follow. The state legislatures that authorized these primaries usually applied them also to the GOP, thus binding the Republicans to the new system as well.⁶

In 1972, the first election under the new rules, caucus participation increased. It increased further in 1976 after the news media decided that the caucuses—particularly the first one in Iowa—warranted heavier coverage.⁷ When Iowa Republicans in 1976 repositioned their caucuses just ahead of New Hampshire’s first-in-the-nation primary, matching what the Democrats had done four years earlier, journalists descended on Iowa in droves, helping to kindle interest in the caucuses among Iowa voters. About 45,000 Iowans participated in the caucuses—a new record for that type of balloting.

Nevertheless, participation in caucus states was far lower than in primary states. The 2.5 percent turnout rate in the 1976 Iowa caucuses paled alongside the 33.4 percent

who voted in that year's New Hampshire primary. Across all states in 1976, turnout averaged 1.9 percent for the caucuses and 28.2 percent for the primaries.⁸

In the 1976-1984 nominating races, the timing of the state contests acted as a stimulus to participation. In scheduling their primary, states typically sought an open date—a Tuesday on which their stand-alone primary would be the center of national attention. When Carter won the hard-fought 1976 Democratic race, for example, the primaries started in New Hampshire (February 24), went on to Massachusetts and Vermont (March 2), then to Florida (March 9), and from there to Illinois (March 16), North Carolina (March 23), New York and Wisconsin (April 6), Pennsylvania (April 27), and Texas (May 1). Not until early May did state contests begin to clump together. The schedule was back-loaded.

Back-loading served to bring voters to the polls. As the campaign moved each week to a new state, its voters experienced an intense campaign that was headline news across the country. The gradual unfolding of the schedule also meant that the races normally would not be decided until late in the schedule. In 1976, for example, both parties had contested campaigns—Gerald Ford versus Ronald Reagan on the Republican side, and Jimmy Carter against a host of contenders on the Democratic side—that lasted until the final day of primaries.

Nevertheless, the average turnout rate in the 1976 primaries, as well as in the 1972, 1980, and 1984 primaries, was lower than that of earlier contested primaries. In his study of eleven competitive primary states in the 1948-1968 presidential elections, the

political scientist Austin Ranney found an average turnout rate of 39 percent.⁹ In the first four presidential elections under the McGovern-Fraser Commission rules, the average turnout in contested primaries was less than 30 percent.¹⁰

The decrease reflected a general decline in voter participation that began after 1960.¹¹ Moreover, the newer primaries—those instituted in 1972 or later—attracted fewer voters than did the more established primaries. In 1976, for example, the turnout difference between the newer primaries and the longstanding ones was 7 percent on average.¹² The older primaries typically received more press attention, and the candidates ordinarily invested more time and money in the established primaries.¹³

During this period, a state's positioning in the schedule had little effect on its turnout level. States with primaries near the back of the schedule had turnout rates comparable to states near the front.¹⁴

The Rise of Frontloading and the Decline in Turnout: 1988-2004

Even though the turnout rate fell after the McGovern-Fraser Commission rules were instituted, the overall number of Americans who cast a vote in a presidential nominating contest rose dramatically. Some thirteen million Americans had cast a nominating ballot in the 1968 elections. In 1980, the number was two-and-a-half times greater—thirty-two million. The increase was attributable to the fact that more than twice as many states held primaries in 1980 as had done so in 1968. In twenty-or-so states, party caucuses had been

replaced by party primaries, which on average attracted fifteen times as many participants.¹⁵

The gain turned out to be short-lived. The nominating process was changing, not because of any adjustment in the rules, but because the states had figured out the dynamics of the new system. The McGovern-Fraser reforms theoretically created a system where the states were equal, save for the fact that more populous states had more delegates to the national conventions. In practice, however, the new system favored the states with early contests. They winnowed the field of candidates and bestowed momentum on the winners, dramatically increasing their chances of success. The early states also hogged the media spotlight. In 1976, for example, there were 100 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts about the New Hampshire primary. Next in line were two contests immediately following it: the Massachusetts primary with 52 evening news stories and the Florida primary with 50 such stories. Other state primaries got much less coverage.¹⁶

From the standpoint of the national parties, this situation was not particularly troublesome. Sequential primaries spread over a four-month period provided an orderly process with a participation level high enough to bestow legitimacy on the nominee and position the party for a unified convention and a vigorous fall campaign.¹⁷ However, many of the state parties were unhappy with the sequencing and threatened to move their contests to the front of the schedule. In an effort to accommodate these demands, the national parties reserved the lead spots for Iowa and New Hampshire and created “a

window” for the other states. They would be allowed to hold their contests anytime between early March (later moved to early February) and early June.

Democrats in southern states were the first to respond. Unhappy with the clout of the early northern contests, the southern states with the exception of South Carolina scheduled their 1988 contests for the same Tuesday in March. Seven other states also moved their primaries to that date, creating the first “Super Tuesday”—a single day on which the candidates would compete across a large number of states. It marked a radical change in the calendar. In the 1970s, the halfway point in delegate selection did not occur until May. In 1988, the halfway point was reached in April.

There was no reason why Super Tuesday had to bring the nominating races to a conclusion, but that became its effect. The candidate with the most money, strongest organization, and deepest party support usually dominated the Super Tuesday primaries, bringing the race to an end even though many states had not yet balloted. In the 1988-2004 period, there was only one truly suspenseful race after the March primaries—the 1988 Democratic race.¹⁸ Super Tuesday in that contest produced a split decision: Jesse Jackson won five southern states; Al Gore picked up five border states and Nevada; and Michael Dukakis carried eight states, including the biggest ones, Texas and Florida. Dukakis’s performance on Super Tuesday was pivotal in his successful run for the party’s nomination, but it was not clear at the time whether he would prevail over Gore. In the other nine races in the 1988-2004 period, the nomination was all but locked up on Super Tuesday.

The creation of Super Tuesday produced a sharp drop in voter participation. The stacking of primaries on a single day, followed by an abrupt end to the race once the votes are tallied, had the effect of creating a three-tiered participation system. The top tier consists of the early states with stand-alone contests. Their voters narrow the field and bestow momentum. The Super Tuesday states constitute the second tier. Their contests do not get the individual attention of the opening contests but their voters put the cap on the nominating races. The third tier consists of the states with contests at the back of the schedule. Their residents get a chance to vote in the presidential contest but the likelihood that their ballots will make any real difference in the outcome is relatively small.

Over the past two decades, turnout has varied significantly across the three tiers. States with stand-alone early primaries have higher participation rates on average than states that ballot simultaneously on or around Super Tuesday. Turnout in the early stand-alone primaries exceeded that of the grouped competitive primaries in every case between 1988 and 2004 with the exception of the 1992 Democratic primaries (see Figure 1). On average, the stand-alone Democratic and Republican primaries had a 15 percent turnout level compared with 11 percent for the grouped primaries. The difference is also apparent from the two election years—1988 and 2000—when both parties had competitive races. On average, the combined turnout of the Democratic and Republican stand-alone competitive primaries was 26.6 percent in 1988 and 30.4 percent in 2000, compared with 23.0 percent and 25.0 percent, respectively, for the competitive grouped primaries.¹⁹

[Figure 1 goes about here]

These differences reflect the varying types of campaigns that are conducted in these states. In states with stand-alone competitive contests, residents get an intense “retail” campaign where the candidates travel from one end of the state to the other. These contests also get intense national news coverage, which include stories about the state, its people, and its policy concerns. In the grouped-primary states, the campaign occurs largely through televised ads with few personal appearances by the candidates. Moreover, the news media concentrate on the larger states in the grouping, often ignoring the smaller states.

Even so, turnout in the competitive grouped primaries is significantly higher than in the third-tier of states—those whose contests are scheduled after the race effectively ends on Super Tuesday. These states merely ratify the decision rendered in earlier contests. Moreover, presumptive nominees have little reason to campaign hard in these states or even to go there. Their money and time is better spent on the states that will be critical in the fall campaign.

Turnout in the late-scheduled contests is shockingly low at times. In 2004, for example, Rhode Island's primary attracted only 5 percent of the state's voting-age population. In the 1988-2004 elections, there were a dozen primaries, all of them held after Super Tuesday, where the turnout was less than 10 percent. Late primaries that

attract significantly more voters nearly always include important races for statewide or congressional office. One such contest, the 1996 West Virginia GOP primary, attracted 24 percent of the Republican electorate, even though Robert Dole had wrapped up the Republican presidential nomination two months earlier.²⁰

Despite such exceptions, primaries held after the nominating race has been settled have little appeal to voters. The political scientists William Mayer and Andrew Bush report, for instance, that the 2000 Republican contests attracted an average of 26 percent of eligible Republicans while George W. Bush's chief rival John McCain was still in the race, 18 percent in primaries held within a month of his dropping out, and only 14 percent in subsequent primaries.²¹

The overall level of primary turnout in the 1988-2004 elections, as well as the turnout for earlier elections, is shown in Figure 2. As could be expected, turnout was lower when only one party had a contested nominating race, as when George W. Bush ran unopposed for the 2004 GOP nomination. The larger lesson in the data is the steep decline in voting participation after front-loading began in 1988. Prior to that election, primary turnout averaged 27.6 percent, compared with 20.2 percent thereafter. The 1996 nominating races were decided by the lowest overall (Democratic and Republican primaries combined) turnout rate (17.5 percent) in history, a record that was broken eight years later when a mere 17.2 percent of eligible voters participated in the primaries. The 2004 election also established a record low for turnout in a contested Democratic race—11.4 percent. The 1988 Republican election had the lowest turnout ever for a contested

race in that party—10.0 percent.

[Figure 2 goes about here]

Low participation rates meant that the nominees were being chosen by a relatively few citizens. In 2004, John Kerry's victories in Iowa and New Hampshire made him appear the all-but-certain Democratic nominee. That year, turnout in New Hampshire set a new record, but turnout in the Super Tuesday contests suffered from the widespread belief that Kerry was unstoppable. Barely more than 10 million Americans--roughly 5 percent of the national electorate--participated in the 2004 Democratic primaries through Super Tuesday.²² Kerry became the Democratic nominee through the support of somewhat more than half of these voters--less than 3 percent of the national electorate.²³

The Incredible Turnout Increase: 2008

Compared with other recent elections, voter participation in the 2008 nominating races was extraordinary. The turnout rate of 30.3 percent in the state primaries was slightly short of the modern record of 30.9 percent[†] set in 1972 (which was the first election conducted under the McGovern-Fraser rules).

[†] Turnout in contested primaries prior to 1972 was also higher than the 2008 level, but the figures are not easily compared. There were only a few contested primaries in most election years in the earlier period because candidates for strategic reasons selectively entered or avoided particular primaries.

Nevertheless, the number of participants was the highest ever. Roughly 57 million voters cast ballots. In the process, most states—three out of every five—had record turnouts for a presidential primary (see Table 1).²⁴ In Indiana, 36.7 percent of voting-age citizens cast a ballot, easily topping the 28.4 percent who voted in 1976. Rhode Island’s 27.0 percent turnout easily topped that state’s previous best of 11.5 percent, also set in 1976. Georgia’s 32.1 percent turnout was nearly 10 percentage points greater than the 22.8 percent who voted in 1988. Arizona’s 24.2 percent turnout was twice that of the state’s old record. So many states set records, in fact, that it is easier to list those that did not. Among those that failed to reach a new high were California, where 41.7 percent turned out, compared with 46.0 percent in 1964; Wisconsin, where 36.5 percent of the voting-eligible population went to the polls, compared with 48.8 percent in 1972, and Maryland, where the participation rate was 27.3 percent, compared with 29.9 percent in 1964.

[Table 1 goes about here]

Tempering the record-setting was the fact that many of the new highs occurred in states with a short primary history. Arizona’s 2008 primary, for instance, was only the third such contest in the state. Nevertheless, the overall turnout level across all the primaries was higher than in all elections since 1972 and was 8 percentage points higher than the average for subsequent elections.

The upsurge is attributable to participation in the Democratic primaries, which attracted on average 19.0 percent of states' voters. Of the thirty-nine Democratic primaries, twenty-seven set a turnout record for the party. Of the thirty-nine Republican primaries, only seven broke the party's old record in the state. The Republican turnout rate of 11.1 percent was about the same as the GOP average since 1984, excluding 2004 when turnout was very low because of Bush' unopposed run for the party's nomination.

Driving the participation upsurge in 2008 were issues that had sparked heightened turnout in the general election four years earlier. In 2004, more than 120 million Americans cast a ballot in the Bush-Kerry race, the highest number on record. Although the turnout rate was below historical highs, it was nonetheless higher than in any election since 1968. Over 60 percent of the vote-eligible population went to the polls in November of 2004, mobilized by concern over the war in Iraq and a weak economy.

These issues carried into the 2008 nominating races, which were compelling for other reasons as well. For the first time since 1952, neither the incumbent president nor vice president was a candidate, thus assuring an open race in both parties. The number of announced candidates was exceptionally high—nearly twenty in all. Moreover, two of the candidates represented historic firsts. Barack Obama was the first candidate of his race to have a realistic chance of winning a major-party presidential nomination. Hillary Clinton was his female equivalent—the first woman to have a realistic chance.

Uncertainty about the outcome of the Democratic and Republican races added to the drama. The Democratic lineup, in addition to Obama and Clinton, included John Edwards, the party's 2004 vice-presidential nominee, who had a well-funded campaign and a finely honed campaign message. On the Republican side, John McCain was the

early favorite, but he faced strong opposition from GOP conservatives and had trouble raising campaign funds, casting doubts on his viability.

The first contests lacked the clear-cut outcomes they often do, which meant the two races were unsettled going into Super Tuesday—which in 2008 included a record-high twenty-three state contests. Super Tuesday helped to clarify the outcome of the Republican race. Although McCain did not run so strongly as to wipe out his competitors, he took a solid lead in the delegate count, which led Mitt Romney to quit the race two days later and forced Mike Huckabee to limp along with limited funding. Even so, Huckabee did not exit the race until thirty-eight states had voted. Not since 1976 had a Republican race lasted that long.

The Democratic race also lasted longer than any race since 1976, going all the way to the last contest before Obama locked up the delegate votes needed for nomination. The Obama-Clinton was more than a marathon. It was the most resource-intensive nominating battle in history. Both candidates were prodigious fundraisers, which enabled them to mount unprecedented television and grassroots campaigns, which heightened public involvement.

The Obama-Clinton race also altered the shape of the electorate. Obama's appeal was centered among two groups--African Americans and young adults--who are normally underrepresented in presidential primaries. Clinton's constituency was disproportionately female. Women voters normally participate in primaries at roughly the same rate as men. In 2008, their participation rate exceeded that of men.

Demographic Characteristics of the 2008 Primaries Electorate. The McGovern-Fraser Commission sought a representative party through broad participation

in the nominating process. Primary electorates, however, are not representative of the party's identifiers, much less of the general population. Better-educated Americans constitute a disproportionate share of the participants. Studies have also found that primary voters are unrepresentative by age and race—older citizens are overrepresented relative to younger ones and whites are overrepresented relative to minorities.²⁵

The 2008 primaries followed the normal pattern when it came to education level. Better-educated citizens made up the large share of the voters (see Table 2). In fact, individuals with a college education were overrepresented among primary voters by a whopping 19.6 percentage points. Moreover, the Republican and Democratic electorates were alike in this respect--the college educated were overrepresented by 18.9 percentage points among Democratic voters and by 20.8 percentage points among Republican voters.

In regard to race, however, the normal pattern did not hold. The historical first of Obama's candidacy lured large numbers of black voters to the polls, so many in fact that blacks voted in close proportion to their numbers in the population. When all primary voters are considered, blacks were overrepresented relative to their population by 0.6 percentage points. This milestone was achieved entirely through black turnout in the Democratic primaries. There, relative to their population in the primary states, they were overrepresented by a remarkable 7.3 percentage points. On the Republican side, they were underrepresented by 10.8 percentage points. (The GOP primaries had lower turnout, which is why the overall figure is not the average of the Democratic and Republican primaries.)

Young voters (18-29 years of age) also figured prominently in the 2008 races. Relative to their numbers in the population, young voters were underrepresented by 9.8

percentage points, instead of the 20 percentage points or so that has often occurred. Obama's candidacy has been credited with drawing unusually large numbers of young adults to the polls in 2008, and the data support that conclusion. Young voters were a substantially larger share of the Democratic electorate than of the Republican electorate. Young voters were underrepresented by 8.6 percentage points among Democratic primary voters, compared with 12.0 percentage points among Republican primary voters.

Older voters (ages 60 and over) were also overrepresented, as is typically the pattern. Relative to their numbers in the population, older voters were overrepresented by 8.7 percentage points in the total primary electorate and by 7.3 and 11.2 percentage points in the Democratic and Republican electorates respectively.

Women were also overrepresented in the 2008 Democratic primaries. After women gained the right to vote in 1920, they were slow to exercise that right. Even as late as 1960, turnout among women in presidential general elections was nearly 10 percentage points lower than men. They reached parity with men in 1980 and, afterward, voted at slightly higher levels in presidential general elections though not in presidential primaries. In the 2008 primaries, however, they voted at higher rates. Women were overrepresented by 1.8 percentage points relative to their adult population in the 2008 primary electorate. Clinton's candidacy on the Democratic side was likely a contributing factor. Women were overrepresented by 6 percentage points among Democratic primary voters while being underrepresented by roughly 5 percentage points among Republican voters.

The distinctive features of Democratic voters electorate were not paralleled on the Republican side. Young voters, women, and African Americans were relatively small

proportions of the Republican electorate. As it has been in other recent elections, the Republican primary electorate was older, whiter, and more male than the Democratic electorate. Whatever their other strengths, McCain and his Republican rivals did not reshape their party's coalition.

Structural Factors and Participation Levels. Structural factors, including states' position in the nominating schedule, affected participation in the 2008 primaries, though less so than in other recent primaries. Compared with the early stand-alone primaries, turnout declined in Super Tuesday's clustered primaries. Only ten days separated the stand-alone South Carolina primary of January 26 with the Super Tuesday primaries of February 5; the candidates had little time to campaign in the twenty-three Super Tuesday states. Nor did most of the candidates have the resources to mount extensive campaigns in these states. Obama was the only candidate to buy televised ads in all of them. The Super Tuesday primaries had an average turnout rate of 28.1 percent, which was substantially less than the 41.1 percent average of the earlier stand-alone primaries.²⁶

Turnout did not fall after Super Tuesday, as is usually the case and which might have been expected given McClain's clear-cut edge advantage over his Republican opponents at this juncture in the race. Turnout in the post-Super Tuesday primaries averaged 30.6 percent. The Obama-Clinton race was the clear attraction. During the post-Super Tuesday period, turnout in the Democratic primaries was 23.9 percent—three times that of the Republican primaries. Democratic turnout was also higher in the early contests but by a three-to-two rather than three-to-one margin.

A structural factor that affected turnout in the 2008 primaries was the rule governing voter eligibility. About half of the primaries were closed in that participation was restricted to the party's registered voters. The other half allowed other voters also to participate. In 2008, the open primaries had a 32.6 percent turnout rate, compared with 28.0 percent rate for the closed primaries. Clearly, if participation is the objective, the open primary is preferable to the closed primary. On the other hand, the nominating process is designed to choose *the* party's presidential candidate, which is an argument for restricting the vote to citizens who register with the party.

Although presidential primaries are distinctive events, they take place in the context of a state's political tendencies and traditions. Some states regularly have higher turnout rates than other states. When the 2008 primary states are divided into thirds according to their turnout level in the 2004 general election, there is a spread of six percentage points (34.3 percent versus 28.2 percent) between the average for the top third and the bottom third. The disparity would have been greater except that two of the top-tier states (Connecticut and Delaware with primary turnouts of 20.1 percent and 23.2 percent, respectively) held closed primaries that were projected to go heavily for Clinton, which dampened turnout in those states. Moreover, the surge in the African American vote boosted turnout in several bottom-third southern states. Although South Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia normally have low levels of election participation, each state's primary in 2008 had a turnout rate in excess of 30 percent.

The Caucuses: Lower Turnout that Is Also Less Representative

In 2008, twelve states used the caucus method for choosing delegates to the Republican and Democratic national conventions. Three states (Idaho, Nebraska, and West Virginia) used the caucus method for one party only.

The turnout rate average was 6.8 percent for states that used the caucus method for both parties, but the rate varied widely (see Table 3). Iowa with its 16.3 percent participation rate was in a class by itself, although Nevada (9.5 percent) and Minnesota (7.2 percent) also had unusually high participation levels. Washington, which held both primaries and caucuses in both parties, had the lowest turnout rate—0.9 percent.

[Table 3 goes about here]

Scheduling had a larger effect on caucus participation than it did on primary participation. The Iowa and Nevada caucuses were stand-alone events in advance of Super Tuesday and garnered considerable attention from the candidates and the press. Their turnout level averaged 12.9 percent. The average for subsequent caucuses was less than half that amount—4.5 percent.

Although caucus turnout in 2008 reached record heights, the average caucus attracted fewer than a fourth as many participants as did the average primary election. Moreover, the caucus electorate was likely less representative of the population than was the primary electorate. Most caucuses are held in the evening and require a larger time commitment than do primaries.²⁷ Caucuses favor people who feel intensely about a candidate or have flexible time. Parents with young children or people who work in the

evenings are among those who find it difficult to participate in a caucus. CNN exit polls in Iowa and Nevada (the only two caucus states where such polls were conducted) indicate that residents in the 30-44 age bracket, which are those who are most likely to have young children, were greatly underrepresented among the participants. Although they account for more than a fourth of the adult population in the two states, they accounted for less than a fifth of the caucus participants.

What the Future Might Hold: 2012 and Beyond

Participation in the 2008 nominating races will contribute to higher turnout in future elections. The large numbers of first-time voters augurs well for 2012 and beyond. Studies have found that once citizens cast their first ballot, the odds increase they will participate in subsequent elections.²⁸

There is a caveat, however. The McGovern-Fraser Commission's rules, as Ranney noted, "were consciously designed to maximize participation by persons who are enthusiasts for a particular aspirant *in the year of the convention.*"²⁹ Perhaps more than anything else, this observation speaks to the probable long-term effects of the rise in participation in 2008. The influx of additional voters in 2008 is attributable to the election's unique features: an unpopular war in Iraq, a wobbly economy, and the historical firsts represented by and the intense competition generated by the Obama and Clinton candidacies. When these influences wane, which will occur as early as the next election, a return to normality is likely.

The size of the primary electorate varies more than does the size of the general electorate. Of course, the latter also shrinks and expands in response to the issues and candidates of the moment. In the 1992 general election, turnout rose several percentage points from its previous level as a result of Americans' economic discontent. But turnout variation in primary elections is larger than for general elections. Moreover, turnout variation is itself increasing. Sandwiched between the upswings in voting in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections was a small increase in turnout voting in the 2006 midterm elections and a downturn in voting in the 2005 and 2007 local elections—indeed, turnout in 2007 apparently was the lowest in modern times.³⁰ Today's voters appear more selective than those of earlier generations, choosing to vote or not vote based on their sense of an election's significance rather than out of sense of personal duty.

Young adults in particular are unreliable participants. If Obama had not won the Democratic race, and it was a close call, some of the young people that he brought into the campaign would have sat out the November election. To date, America's young adults have not demonstrated a willingness to participate in election politics whatever the issues, arenas, or candidates. Perhaps that will change if the tone and direction of American politics changes. But the climate of citizenship is different today than in the past, when the nation's schools, families, media, and political institutions nurtured an ongoing sense of civic duty and involvement.³¹

In the near future, however, the major problem will be the difficulty of sustaining voter turnout in a nominating process that treats states and their voters unequally. The

structure of the presidential nominating system creates what Kathleen Hall Jamieson has called “a primary season of haves and have-nots.”³² Super Tuesday usually marks the end of the competition for all practical purposes, depressing the vote in states that are yet to hold their contests. Unless frontloading is eliminated, the typical participation pattern will be the one in place during the 1988-2004 elections: reasonably high participation at the outset, followed by a sharp drop after Super Tuesday.

The Republican and Democratic parties are aware of the problem, although participation is not always a top priority. Above all, they want a process that will yield a viable nominee. If that can be accomplished through high participation rates in the nominating phase, participation will be embraced. If heightened participation threatens the party’s chances in the fall, the party’s enthusiasm for it declines significantly, as illustrated by Democratic national party chair Howard Dean’s behind-the-scenes efforts in 2008 to speed the conclusion of the Obama-Clinton race.

On the other hand, the national parties are sensitive to the concerns of the states, all of which want a meaningful voice in the process. Toward this end, for example, the 1996 Republican National Committee Task Force on Primaries and Caucuses sought to blunt front-loading by granting bonus delegates to any state that scheduled its contest toward the end of the nominating process.³³ The Republican Party also acted to penalize states, including Iowa and New Hampshire, holding their contest before the earliest calendar date on which any state can freely place its contest. States that hold a primary or caucus before this date lose half their convention delegates. Jim Nicholson, a member of

the Task Force and later the GOP's national chair, cited participation as the basis for the new formula. "Primaries are a good way to get people involved with the party, and where fewer people vote, the party loses strength."

However, this change has not resolved the front-loading problem. In fact, as the Michigan and Florida Republican primaries in 2008 illustrate, some states are more than willing to forfeit half their delegates for the opportunity to hold an early contest. In a statement justifying Florida's decision to do so, the state's governor Charlie Crist said: "Florida's diverse population will be more influential in the presidential primary process."³⁴

Nor will any of the widely proposed alternatives to the present nominating system fix the frontloading problem. For a decade, the National Association of Secretaries of State (the organization of state election officials) has tried to persuade the parties to adopt a rotating regional primaries system. Such a system would begin with state contests in one region of the country, then move to a second region, and so on. The order would change with each election, allowing each region to be first in the rotation once every sixteen years. Other objections to this system aside, it is unlikely to give residents of all regions a chance for meaningful participation. A well-funded candidate with name recognition and party support like Dole in 1996 and Bush and Gore in 2000 could easily dominate the first region's contests. Even if the race did not end there, such a candidate would likely sweep the next region's contests. Voters in the remaining regions would then be disenfranchised. They would probably feel cheated. It is one thing when a system

denies residents of single states a vote, as in the current system, and quite another when a system silences residents of *every* southern, western, midwestern, or northeastern state. The effect would be heightened if a regional favorite was perceived to have lost out because of the order of the voting.

In April 2008, the Republican National Committee proposed a new nominating system that, if approved at the Republican National Convention, would substantially revamp the rules. The proposal would preserve Iowa and New Hampshire's lead-off positions and allow South Carolina and Nevada to hold their contests anytime thereafter. The other states would be divided into three groups that included a mix of large and small states. The contests of each group would be spaced a month apart, and the order of each group would be decided by lottery. Republican leaders touted the system as a way to extend the voting deep into the nominating season, thereby ensuring widespread participation. But this scenario might be unrealistic. Any campaign fought across a large group of states simultaneously is going to be waged with media and money. This phase would resemble Super Tuesday, giving a decisive edge to a candidate with high public recognition and lots of money. A very strong showing in the first group could end the race at this point or, at the least, result in a lopsided flow of money and voter support to the frontrunner, increasing the odds of a knock-out blow when the next group of contests is held, leaving residents of the remaining states without a voice in the nominating race.

The irony is that the parties had something close to an adequate system—if voter turnout is an overriding goal—in the 1970s, when the nominating schedule unfolded a

state at a time. The 2008 nominating elections will undoubtedly be talked about again and again as the paradigm of heightened voter participation, as well they should.

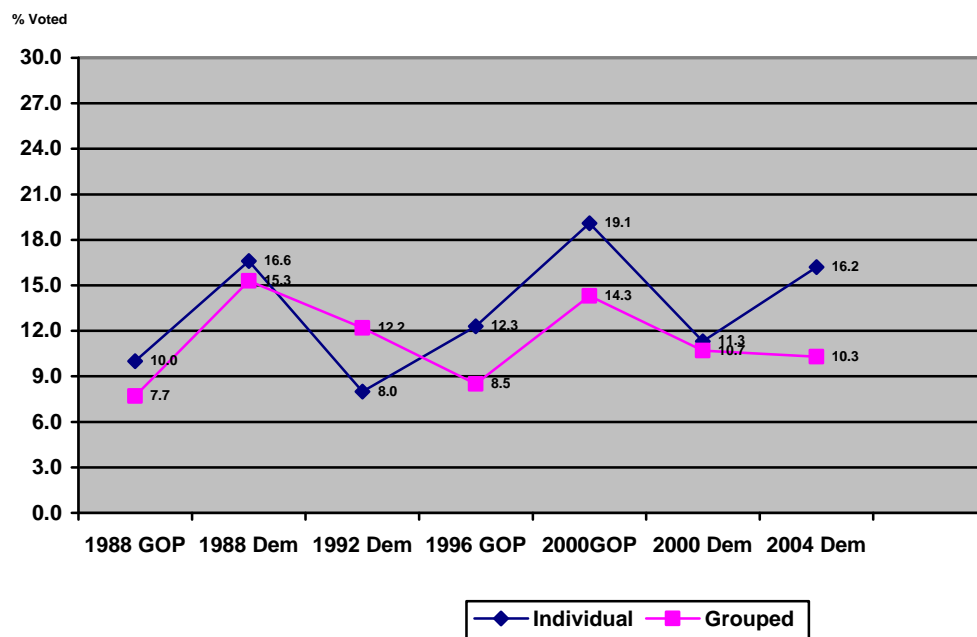
Nevertheless, the 2008 contests achieved this remarkable distinction despite a nominating process that in *most* elections produces a large numbers of “have-nots”—states that are theoretically part of the nominating process but are denied the chance to hold a meaningful contest.

The clustering of state contests early in the schedule is more than just a problem of low turnout in the late contests. It also creates a “silent spring” that affects all Americans, whatever their state of residence. Once the nominations are settled by Super Tuesday, the campaign loses much of its appeal. The conventions are still months away, but the primary races are effectively over, and people lose interest. In 2000, for example, the number of people paying close attention to the campaign was sliced in half within a month after Super Tuesday gave Bush and Gore the party nominations. The same thing happened in 1996. Election interest declined sharply after Dole’s win on Super Tuesday and did not rise again until the national party conventions in August.³⁵ In the 1970s, when the nominating races ended later, citizens remained interested for a longer period. In 1976, for example, interest rose month by month as the campaign moved toward the final early June contests in California, Ohio, and New Jersey.³⁶ The cost of frontloading, then, also includes a diminution of election attention, which affects how informed Americans will become about the candidates and issues.

Something better is needed. Participation ought not to rest so heavily on the

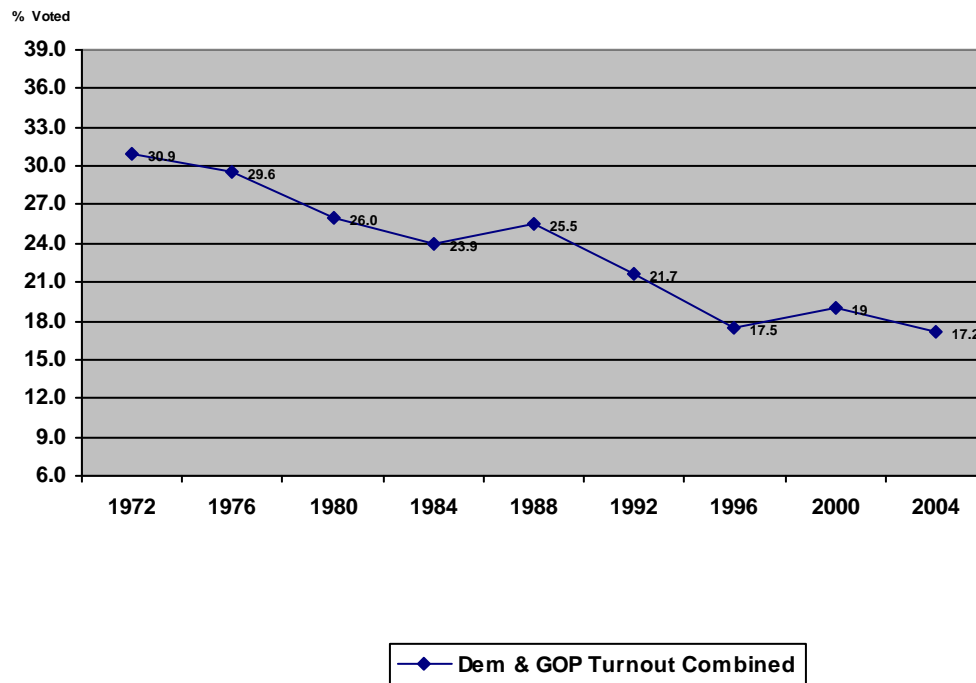
particulars of a given election. A presidential campaign is America's best chance to mobilize and engage the public. It's an opportunity that ought not to be wasted.

Figure 1. Voter in Contested Individual vs Grouped Primaries, 1988-2004



Source: Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, "2004 Primary Turnout Low: Grouped Primaries Lower Than Individual," March 9, 2004.

Figure 2. Presidential Primary Turnout 1964-2004



Source: Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, “2008 Primary Turnout Falls Just Short of Record Nationally, Breaks Record in Most States,” March 9, 2008.

Table 1. Voter Turnout in Primary Election States, 2008

State	Overall	Democratic	Republican
Alabama	32.1% *	15.8% *	16.3% *
Arizona	24.2% *	11.1% *	13.1%
Arkansas	26.0%	14.9%	11.1% *
California	41.7%	23.1% *	18.6%
Connecticut	20.1% *	14.1% *	6.0%
Delaware	23.2% *	15.2% *	8.0% *
District of Columbia	35.2% *	33.4% *	1.7%
Florida	29.7% *	13.8% **	15.9%
Georgia	32.1% *	16.8% *	15.3% *
Idaho	-	no primary	12.0%
Illinois	34.3% *	23.8% *	10.5%
Indiana	36.7% *	27.9% *	8.9%
Kentucky	28.4% *	22.3% *	6.3%
Louisiana	19.3%	13.6%	5.7%
Maryland	27.3%	19.8%	7.5%
Massachusetts	38.2% *	27.3% *	10.9%
Michigan	20.2%	8.4% **	11.8%
Mississippi	26.5%	20.2% *	6.3%
Missouri	32.6% *	19.0% *	13.6%
Montana	-	30% *	no primary
Nebraska	18.1%	7.4%	10.7%
New Hampshire	51.9% *	28.5% *	23.4%
New Jersey	28.9% *	19.3% *	9.6%
New Mexico	19.2%	11.2% *	8%
New York	20.5% *	15.0% *	5.5%
North Carolina	32.7% *	24.6% *	8.1% *
Ohio	40.3%	27.5%	14.3%
Oklahoma	29% *	16.3%	13.1% *
Oregon	39.7%	21.7% *	18%
Pennsylvania	33.3% *	24.7% *	8.5%
Rhode Island	27.0% *	23.6% *	3.4%
South Carolina	30.3% *	16.5% *	13.8%
South Dakota	28.9%	17.1% *	12.1%
Tennessee	26.1% *	13.8%	12.3% *
Texas	28.6% *	19.3% *	9.3%
Utah	23.7%	7.2%	16.5%
Vermont	39.4% *	31.3% *	8.1%
Virginia	26.5% *	17.7% *	8.8%
Washington	27.3%	15.4% *	11.9%

West Virginia	33.4%	25.1%	8.3%
Wisconsin	36.5%	26.7%	9.8%

*indicates record high turnout

**primary not sanctioned by national Democratic Party

Sources: CNN, Committee for Study of the American Electorate, and United States Election Project. Figures calculated by dividing the number of voters in a primary by the number of vote-eligible adults in the state.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the 2008 Primary Electorate

	Democratic electorate	Republican electorate	Total electorate
College grad	+18.9%	+20.8	+19.6%
Non-college grad	-18.9%	-20.8%	-19.6%
White, non-hispanic	-6.1%	+14.8%	+2.4%
Black	+7.3%	-10.8%	+0.08%
Women	+5.6%	-4.9%	+1.8%
Men	-5.6%	+4.9%	-1.8%
Ages 18-29	-8.6%	-12.0%	-9.8%
Ages 60 & over	+7.3%	+11.2%	+8.7%

+/- indicates in percentage points the difference of a group as a proportion of a particular electorate and as a proportion of the total vote-eligible population. Thus, for example, if a group constituted 52 percent of the Democratic electorate and was 50 percent of the vote-eligible population, it's score in the Democratic electorate column would be +2. Thus, positive numbers indicate that a group was overrepresented in an electorate relative to its proportion of the vote-eligible population. The total figure is based on calculations where 63.1 percent of the primary voters participated in the Democratic contests and 36.9 percent participated in the Republican contests.

Sources: CNN exit polls and U.S. Census Bureau data. Figures based only on primaries where a CNN exit poll was conducted.

Table 3. Voter Turnout in Caucus States, 2008

State	Overall	Democratic	Republican
Hawaii	*	*	*
Alaska	5.0%	1.8%	3.2%
Colorado	5.5%	3.5%	2.0%
Idaho	-	2.1%	no caucus
Iowa	16.3%	10.9%	5.4%
Kansas	4.3%	1.9%	2.4%
Maine	*	4.8%	*
Minnesota	7.2%	5.7%	1.5%
Nebraska	-	3.0%	no caucus
Nevada	9.5 %	6.9%	2.6%
North Dakota	5.9%	3.9%	2.0%
Washington	0.9%	0.7%	0.2%
West Virginia	-	no caucus	*
Wyoming	2.5%	2.2%	0.3%
Texas	-	7.2%	no caucus

*Number of caucus participants was not tallied by state party

Sources: CNN and United States Elections Project. Figures calculated by dividing the number of caucus participants by the number of vote-eligible adults in the state.

¹ *The 14th Biannual Youth Survey on Politics and Public Service*, Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, April 2008.

² Quoted in Paul T. David, Ralph M. Goldman, and Richard C. Bain, *The Politics of National Party Conventions* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1960). p. 296.

³ The Democratic turnout in the 1968 presidential primaries was 24.3 percent of the voting age population. By comparison, the average Democratic turnout for the 1980-2004 period was half that level. See Curtis Gans, "2004 Primary Turnout Low," report of the Center for the Study of the American Electorate, Washington, D.C., March 9, 2005, p. 11.

⁴ *Mandate for Reform* (Washington, D.C.: Democratic National Committee, 1970), p. 33.

⁵ For an overview of the McGovern-Fraser Commission's objectives, see Austin Ranney, *Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1976* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1977), pp. 44-49.

⁶ William Crotty and John S. Jackson III, *Presidential Primaries and Nominations* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1977), pp. 44-49.

⁷ Hugh Winebrenner, Hugh, *The Iowa Precinct Caucuses: The Making of a Media Event*, 2nd ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1998).

⁸ Ranney, *Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1976*, p. 20.

⁹ Austin Ranney, "Turnout and Representation in Presidential Primary Elections," *American Political Science Review* 66 (March 1972), p. 29.

- ¹⁰ Ranney, *Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1976*, p. 20; Austin Ranney, ed., *The Elections of 1980* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), pp. 353-364; Jack Moran and Mark Fenster, "Voter Turnout in Presidential Primaries," *American Politics Quarterly* 10 (October 1982): 453-76.
- ¹¹ Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Vintage, 2003), p. 4.
- ¹² Author's calculation based on available 1976 turnout data.
- ¹³ Ranney, *Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1976*, pp. 26-35.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ William Crotty and John S. Jackson III, *Presidential Primaries and Nominations* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1985), p. 84.
- ¹⁶ Donald R. Matthews, "Winnowing," in James David Barber, ed. *Race for the Presidency* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 65.
- ¹⁷ Gans, "2004 Primary Turnout Low," p. 5.
- ¹⁸ William G. Mayer, "The Basic Dynamics of the Contemporary Nominating Process," in Mayer, ed. *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2004* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 91.
- ¹⁹ Gans, "2004 Primary Turnout Low," p. 6.
- ²⁰ Example from William G. Mayer and Andrew E. Busch, *The Frontloading Problem in Presidential Nominations* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2004), pp. 83-84.
- ²¹ Ibid, p. 84.
- ²² Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, "2008 Primary Turnout Falls Just Short of Record Nationally, Breaks Record in Most States," May 19, 2008, p. 1.
- ²³ CNN exit polls, March 2, 2004.
- ²⁴ "2008 Primary Turnout Falls Just Short of Record Nationally, Breaks Record in Most States," p. 1. The CSAE figures are the basis for the individual state percentages presented in this paragraph.
- ²⁵ See, for example, James L. Lingle, *Representation and Presidential Primaries: The Democratic Party in the Post-Reform Era* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981); Barbara Norrander, "Explaining Individual Participation in Presidential Primaries," *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Sep., 1991), pp. 640-655.
- ²⁶ For this and subsequent references to the overall turnout (Republican and Democratic turnout combined) in state primaries, the data exclude the Michigan and Florida primaries, which were not sanctioned by the Democratic national party, and also exclude those states that held a primary in one party only. For example, Idaho Democrats participated through the caucus method while Idaho Republicans voted in a primary.
- ²⁷ Michael P. McDonald, "The Generational Turnout War," Brookings Institution press release, January 4, 2008, p. 1.
- ²⁸ See Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- ²⁹ Austin Ranney, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction: Party Reform in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 153.
- ³⁰ Local election turnout is harder to track than federal or statewide election turnout because there is no central recording administration. However, numerous localities claimed to have set record lows in 2007 and hardly any reported an upswing in voter participation.
- ³¹ "2008 Primary Turnout Falls Just Short of Record Nationally, Breaks Record in Most States," p. 1.
- ³² Quoted in "Heavy Campaigning Leads to Better Informed Citizens," *The Political Standard* (a publication of the Alliance for Better Campaigns), April 2000, p. 6.
- ³³ Example from William G. Mayer, ed., *In Pursuit of the White House 2000* (New York: Chatham House, 2000), pp. 60-63.
- ³⁴ Rachel Kapochunas, "Florida Double-Dares National Parties as Jan. 29 Primary Date is Enacted," *The New York Times* website, May 21, 2007.
- ³⁵ Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter*, p. 113.
- ³⁶ Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election* (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 68.